Introduction

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In late 2005, the Center for Social Justice at Boalt Hall School of Law convened a dynamic gathering of socially concerned scholars, activists and litigators to assess the needs and find solutions to the challenges facing California's Central Valley.

The conference, "The New Face of California: The Great Central Valley" should serve as a model for universities and community advocates across the nation. The series of presentations, panels and discussions raised awareness, formed powerful coalitions and provided vital insights into the social conditions in the state's Central Valley. The conference delved deeply into a range of timely issues including land use policy, the environment, labor and employment, education and youth and political participation. This convening was special, in that it served as a beginning, not an end. The work that started at Boalt Hall in 2005 continues in even deeper ways today throughout the Central Valley.

Specifically, this conference marked the founding of an initiative called the Community University Research and Action Alliance for Justice (CURAJ), the opening meeting for which was located in my own hometown of Merced. This initiative does what few in the academy have been able to do. It effectively bridges the worlds between research and action and between academia and the community so as to collaboratively find solutions for the areas most urgent and most complex social problems. CURAJ is committed to leveraging the vast intellectual capacity of the area's colleges and universities to make real difference to the men, women and children of the rapidly growing Central Valley.

As is true elsewhere in the nation, the gap between the haves and have nots is widening in California. Nowhere is that clearer than in the Central Valley.

Since the middle of the last century, the Valley's agricultural industry has been a magnet for the working class and for immigrants who've tended the fields, packed boxes and served customers all as part of a vast industry that feeds much of the nation. In a cruel twist, though, a recent report from UCLA showed that some of the worst hunger problems exist right in the Central Valley, the place often referred to as the nation's "bread basket."[1] Researchers from UCLA found that 35 percent of adults in Merced, for example, live in a "state of food insecurity." In other words, they have so little money that they must worry about finding adequate food. The percentage of "food insecure" adults was similar elsewhere: 41 percent in San Joaquin, 44 percent in Madera and 53 percent in Tulare.[2]

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1. Gail G. Harrison et al., *More Than 2.9 Million Californians Now Food Insecure: One in Three Low-Income, An Increase in Just Two Years*, UCLA CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH, HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF (2005).

2. MARLENE BEGIAMIN ET AL., HEALTHY PEOPLE 2010: A 2005 PROFILE OF HEALTH STATUS

More generally, in the remarkably diverse Central Valley, residents have among the lowest incomes, highest unemployment rates, lowest educational attainment and poorest health outcomes in the state. In Merced, for example, the percentage of children with income below 100 percent of the federal poverty level in 2003 was 31 percent. In Fresno, it was 36 percent and in Tulare, it was 39 percent. (Overall, in California, the rate was 22 percent, which is high relative to the rest of the nation).

On top of these daunting social conditions, we face the challenges that come from astoundingly rapid growth. Demographers predict that the growth rate through 2030 will be 65 percent higher in the Central Valley than the average growth rate for the state. Between 1993 and 2003 alone, the Valley grew by a half million residents to more than 2.3 million people. (As a California State University study recently noted, that is about equal to the population of Oregon.) By 2040, it is projected that 7 million people will call the Central Valley home.[3] Rapid development without appropriate planning and careful attention to the environment can negatively affect everyone's quality of life. But, as history shows, the effects are usually most detrimental to the poor and disenfranchised.

Statistics and challenges such as these make it even clearer to me that it is incumbent upon all of us in the academy to build more solution-oriented relationships with activists and community leaders on the ground. We socially concerned scholars and litigators need to hear from and understand the work and needs of the men and women on the front line working with those most in need in our society.

If we in the academy turn a deaf ear to the useful knowledge, perspectives and powerful voices from people working day-to-day in the communities that we're ostensibly here to serve, our efforts to bring knowledge to the world might be for naught. In the context of a radically unequal society, knowledge is power only if it eventually leads to some action and benefit of the disenfranchised. Similarly, activists and community workers can benefit enormously from the careful consideration of problems and methodical research academia can provide. Academics can help put the work of activists into a national or international context, help community workers articulate their arguments and needs, all the while providing data that could place activists' concerns on the agendas of the state Legislatures, community leaders and the public at large.

Just as activists and social workers can provide the textured detail and narratives about, for example, the human effects of environmental pollution in a disadvantaged neighborhood, academics can demonstrate the way in which that problem affects other communities across the country. They can show us how other communities are confronting similar challenges and point to effective model programs. Academics might also gather the appropriate members of the scientific and public health communities to conduct research on the needs of a particular community. Law students might research litigation on, say, environmental justice in other states and craft a legal case to ameliorate the problem particular to a community in the Central Valley. Through these efforts, the university has helped

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IN THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY (California State University, Fresno, 2005).

3. *Id.*

shine a light on crucial social challenges that might otherwise been ignored.

It is exactly this kind of model that inspired the work of one of my heroes, Charles Hamilton Houston, for whom the Institute I founded at Harvard Law School is named. Houston worked with a dedicated band of Howard Law School colleagues and students (including his most famous mentee, Thurgood Marshall) and social scientists elsewhere to develop theories and ground-breaking cases that led to the triumphant *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ended the "separate but equal" doctrine. Like the founders of CURAJ, we at the Houston Institute, in the footsteps of our namesake, believe that theories and ideas are necessary. However, they are hardly sufficient.

This collection of articles is a model, as well, for another crucial quality in our continuing struggle for equal life chances for all. Interdisciplinary collaboration—of which the 2005 gathering and this journal are brilliant examples—is an absolutely crucial, often overlooked endeavor.

As Charles Hamilton Houston said immediately after winning a precedent-setting graduate school desegregation case: "This fight for equality of educational opportunity (was) not an isolated struggle. All our struggles must tie in together and support one another. . .We must remain on the alert and push the struggle farther with all our might." He urged his fellow colleagues in academia, in addition to like-minded activists on the ground to "cooperate in public forums. . .agitate for more truth. . ." and "along with the educational process. . .be prepared to fight, if necessary, every step of the way."[4]

In many communities, academics must fight as well against a reputation for being uninvolved, distanced, and purposely above the fray of day-to-day challenges in disadvantaged communities. However, social scientists and socially concerned legal scholars have, throughout history, played tireless, vital roles in every significant civil rights battle. Charles Hamilton Houston is just one example. Now, organizations such as CURAJ on the West Coast and the Houston Institute on the East Coast continue this long, proud legacy. They also provide a haven of sorts where the socially concerned scholar and litigator need not apologize for trying to be the change they wish to see in the world.

It has been a great honor to be involved with the efforts of the Social Justice Center at Boalt Hall. I look forward to a long partnership in the future.

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4. Charles Hamilton Houston, *Don't Shout Too Soon*, THE CRISIS, March, 1936.